

# GARMENT GIRLS AND ARMY BOYS

FORETELLING THE FUTURE

Sunila Abeysekera



In the Sinhala language cinema of Sri Lanka, the decade of the 1990s has been one in which film-makers have struggled against a range of economic and political odds to carve out a space within which they could engage in a cinematic exploration of contemporary Sri Lankan realities. The combination of intensive globalization and militarization provided a framework in which processes of social disintegration saw the emergence of new social phenomenon such as the female headed household, the migration of women from their homes for paid employment within and outside the country and the enrolment of young men from poor rural families into the army.

The film oeuvre of Prasanna Vithanage and Asoka Handagama, two film makers who through their work re-presented diverse modern narratives of life in

Sri Lanka at the end of the 20th century stand out as symbols of this moment in our history. Joining them were other young directors, for example, Udayakantha Warnasuriya, Mohamed Niyas and Jayantha Chandrasiri, with somewhat ad hoc explorations of cinematic form and a focus on contemporary content. Ending decades of an almost absolute silence on the political turmoil that had gripped our island nation since the 1970s, issues of war, loss, displacement, violence against women, the despair of the young and the emergence of new forms of the family and social relationships in the wake of wide-ranging transformations in gender identities all became subject matters for reflection and interpretation on the screen. As the century ended, Inoka Satyanganee and Satyajit Maitpe emerged as pioneers among those directors with a first film that moved the Sri Lankan cinema on into the 21st century.



## GOOD GIRL/BAD GIRL

However, much as they challenged many existing frameworks of representation and articulation of modern Sri Lankan narrative, a key area in which these young film directors by and large have failed to change the path of the Sri Lankan cinema has been in the portrayal and representation of women. While Handagama in particular has, through his work, explored articulations of diverse sexualities with great insight and sensitivity, for example, in *THIS IS MY MOON* (Me Magey Sandai/2001) and in *FLYING WITH ONE WING* (Thani Thatuwan Piyanbana/2002) the representation of women, of the 'female' and of the 'feminine' often remains trapped within stereotypical and archetypal forms and shapes ascribed by tradition.

Over the years in which I have watched Sinhala films, I have been developing a hypothesis that builds on the work of film analyst and fellow Sri Lankan, Laleen Jayamane: this is that the Sinhala cinema offers women who defy limits and social practices defined by culture and tradition very few routes of escape: suicide, murder, madness or entry into Holy Orders. In film after film, we have watched heroines who displayed courage and determination being swept under the waves of patriarchal conformity. The dichotomy of good girl/bad girl, village girl/city girl as noted by Jayamane in her viewing of the Sinhala cinema of Sri Lanka in the 1970s remained vibrant throughout the 1990s. 'Bad' girls changed their location; they moved to work in West Asia, in the Free Trade Zone factories or in the sex industry. 'Good' girls continued to find fulfillment in being endlessly tolerant and devoted wives and mothers.

This piece is a reflection on a particular phenomenon observed by me in this journey of tracking 'non-changes' in female representation in the contemporary Sinhala cinema. That is, the portrayal of two very specific types of modern young Sri Lankans: young women workers in garment factories and young men employed in the armed forces of the Sri Lankan state. At the level of national statistical information, she provides a large part of the nation's foreign earnings; she keeps the island safe from all threats to its security. Together, they comprise the ethos of a 'modern' Sri Lanka, framing the reality within contemporary political and economic complexities.

## ASSERTING MASCULINITY

For the young men who go to war, joining the Sri Lankan army offers an escape from rural inertia, unemployment and poverty. The loss of 'masculine' power associated with their circumstances is challenged by the opening up of possibilities to assert and bearing a gun in the 'defense of the motherland'. Research shows that the rapid increase of security forces over the past decade in a context of war has changed the social and demographic patterns of the south of the island, especially in districts such as Kurunegala, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, in a very drastic manner. These young men balance their increased vulnerability to death or permanent disability with the status and 'manhood' they achieve through being a part of the security forces and also with the economic security they gain

exploitation and violence.

Ways that sometimes expose them to further the arena of personal and sexual relationships in from home offers the space and opportunity to explore of 'freedom' and 'choice' and respect within the conditions being balanced by the new experiences spoken of their exploitative working and living themselves. Many women I have talked to, have in their position as well as in their perception of their family economy has led to substantial changes in their physical relocation of family and a space outside of the supervision of family and of independence through their physical relocation. However, the fact that most of these young women gain a degree of vulnerabilities is, sadly, commonplace. However, the for low income families; preying on the these workers has become a major source of income and Biyagama, near Colombo, renting out rooms and they go to work. All around the FTZ's of Katunayake and abuse in the communities in which they live with vulnerability of these women to all forms of violence exploitation of labour but also the heightened welfare and rights of these women confront not only of their work and existence. Groups working for the Zones (FTZ's) have highlighted the exploitative nature for employment in the factories of the Free Trade from rural communities who migrate to urban centres Many studies into the phenomenon of young women



for themselves and their families. Many young soldiers build houses and offer dowries for their sisters for the first time in their lives; the generous compensation packages offered by the army also mean that the end of their lives can signal the beginning of a better life for their families. Young men going into the army have been known to say that they are taking a calculated risk, knowing that their families will benefit in the event of their death. In addition, the 'manhood' conferred on them through the individual possession of weapons and uniforms and the collective and social power of the military man in a heavily militarized society enables them to re-negotiate their relationships with women. Media advertising for army recruitment has always shown the attraction of women to men in uniform as one of the reasons why one should join the armed forces. The impunity granted by the uniform and the fact of constantly living on the edge of potential death combine to create a particular mind-set in the young soldier that enables him to challenge existing barriers of social conformity and 'good behaviour'.

Thus, there are common features that mark both young women and young men from rural areas who leave their homes for employment. They find themselves free from the restraints and limitations imposed by norms and standards that prevail within their homes, families and communities that prohibit and sanction close relationships between young men and women except with parental approval and marriage prospects. They find themselves with independent incomes of which some portion may be kept for consumption for themselves. Their work environments are difficult and demanding and often filled with many tensions. Few of them perceive their present employment as being a life-time career; their dreams are of returning to their villages with some savings which could be invested in homes and homesteads. Their present phase of life is therefore somewhat temporary and they themselves transient. The emotional and psychological state of young women and men in such circumstances of alienation and transition is of course something that calls for far more intensive analysis and exploration. However, impressionistic observations point to deep-rooted feelings of loneliness, uprootedness and instability coupled with a sense of freedom and adventure that often results in reckless and foolhardy behaviour.

It is difficult to ascribe a collective thought process to diverse film directors who have made the lives of young women garment factory workers and young men soldiers the focus of their work. However, the challenges that have been posed to Sinhala society by these radical and often unmediated processes of transformation in rural southern Sri Lanka have provided these directors with characters and situations which allow them to construct narratives of love, sex and betrayal in contemporary Sri Lanka. In particular it allows them to explore nuances of sexuality and intimacy between the young women and men concerned.

Four recent Sinhala films have portrayed these characters through the prism of personal relationships and entanglements. They are H.D. Premaratna's *Kinihiriya Mal* (2001), Inoka Satyanage's *THE WIND BIRD* (*Sulang Kirillae* / 2001), Satyajit Maitpe's *SCENT OF THE LOTUS POND* (*Bora Diya Pokuna* / 2001) and Prasanna Vithanage's triptych, *AUGUST SUN* (*Ira Madiyama* / 2003).

#### KINIHIRIYA MAL

In *Kinihiriya Mal*, Premaratna lays out a very straightforward narrative structure of a very typical contemporary moral tale. A young woman from a village comes to the city to work and is first ensnared and then destroyed by the wiles of modern and urban life. Premaratna's village is the perfect stereotype – lush green paddy fields, the tank, the setting sun, provide an appropriate backdrop to the earth road along which the 'village lass' walks home after her evening bath, her wet hair streaming down her back! The unemployed village youth plays his flute, village women sing as they reap the harvest. Harmony prevails until the 'bad' news trickles in from the city that the girl who left the village has become a 'bad' city woman.

The film creates constant visual reinforcement of the illusionary pastoral scene along with the nostalgia for women who behave as they are supposed to combine, contributing to the sense of 'unreality' about the film because this 'beauty' and 'harmony' are in fact at odds with the reality of rural poverty and unemployment that propels young people out of the village and into the city. Premaratna too easily slips



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into the formal nationalist mode of the Sinhala cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, in which we saw a constant harking back to village life as the ideal. In his earlier films, too, Premaratna was prone to this simplistic juxtaposition of village/good and urban/bad, for example in *Seilama* (1995) and *Sapta Kanya* (1993). In *Kinihiriya Mal* he loses the thread of his substantive narrative which is about modernization, rural to urban migration, urbanization, export-oriented industrialization and the exploitation of the cheap labour and sexuality of women in Free Trade Zone factories because of this tendency to juxtapose and give added value to the traditional ideal.

The protagonist of *Kinihiriya Mal* is Sanduni, the girl from the village who migrates to the city to work in a garment factory. The film depicts her life as a factory worker and the difficulties in the process of adjustment rather marginally. Through a neighbour, Prinsy, who is the epitome of the 'urbanized' and 'Westernized' woman (read 'bad') Sanduni is introduced to a different life and lifestyle. At a party, she is subjected to sexual violence and eventually becomes a sex worker. Two patterns that we see in 'normal' society are replicated here: one is the belief that once a woman has been subject to sexual abuse or violence, she is a 'lost' or 'fallen' woman with no option in life but to move on to sex work for her survival. The other is the portrayal of women factory workers as being 'fast' and 'immoral'. While available data points out that the majority of the workforce in the FTZs come from lower and middle-income families and have studied up to senior secondary school level, films such as *Kinihiriya Mal* continue to portray them as poorly educated, lacking in experience and options and lacking confidence in themselves.

When news of Sanduni's transformation reaches her village, her entire life crumbles. Inevitably, Sanduni must meet with a tragic death. As she topples off the stairway of an urban multi-storey shopping complex, one cannot help but wonder at the brazen symbolism of the concrete jungle consuming village innocence. Once again, my hypothesis is vindicated. It is only death that can resolve the social tensions generated by a young woman who transgresses the boundaries of ascribed behaviour. Those who have abused her and violated her rights remain alive; she, who is

somehow a victim of circumstances in her life, must die to become an agent of her own fate, must die in this scenario, violently.

### SULANG KIRILLEE

*Sulang Kirillee* is Inoka Satyangani's first feature film. Her narrative structure is fractured, the whole unfolding as a series of flashbacks, the whole bounded by the few seconds in which the protagonist goes into a clinic and receives a medical report that confirms that she is pregnant. As she walks out with her report in hand, the young woman confronts the fact of her pregnancy, and the film moves into a series of flashbacks that move back and forth in time. They could be memories of an incident that actually took place somewhere in the past, or they could be imaginary, or a mixture of both. An interesting feature of the film is this ambivalence that leaves us guessing as to whether what we are seeing is fact or fiction. It is within the larger framework of cinematic fiction that we learn about this device only as the film ends, when it returns to the visuals with which it began, with the woman walking away from the clinic. Caught up in the news, she walks right into a car and falls down in front of it. The last shot of the film is of her being invited into the car by the passengers.

The flashbacks tell the story of the film. The girl comes from a rural middle class family. The sequence in which she is pictured at home with her parents points to the fact that she is from a home in which the level of poverty and need to seek employment in the city is perhaps not as sharp as, for example, it is in the case of Sanduni in *Kinihiriya Mal*. The home is large and traditional, with pieces of old furniture that indicate a middle-class existence, at least in the past. It is reminiscent of every Sinhala film that depicts the rural middle-class dwelling in exactly this manner, with the verandahs and standard 'old' furniture such as a four poster bed.

Inoka's depiction of life in the boarding house occupied by young women factory workers is perhaps more accurate than Premaratna's. In both films you do get a glimpse of the crowded and often unclean environments in which these women must live, as well as the cramped living quarters in which several of them must live, cook and sleep. The fact



that in *Sulang Kirillee* the girl has a room of her own, which is a luxury in these situations is perhaps an indication of the fact that her family circumstances allow her to retain a larger part of her earnings for herself.

Her boyfriend is an army man who sees her whenever he is on leave. They meet in her room, they meet on the beach, there is a level of intimacy between them including sexual intimacy that would never have been 'allowed' in her home/village environment. She is anxious, and excited by the pregnancy. He is shocked. He urges her to have an abortion, and offers her money to pay for it. She accepts the money but remains ambivalent about it. She seeks him out in his village and discovers that he is poor, married, with one child and a pregnant wife. She does not reveal the truth about herself to the wife and leaves determined to have the baby regardless of his demands. They quarrel and separate. She is on her own, yearning for the baby. One night she delivers the baby in the toilet, alone. What next? The film is inconclusive.

It is this inconclusive and ambivalent nature of the film that is expressed through its cyclical narrative structure. It challenges the viewer to delve deeper into the complexities of the situation and grapple with the choices that confront the young woman, rather than pursue the straightforward 'possibilities' of 'what happens next'. It encourages us to look at the two young people in the film and examine their actions from the point of view of the broader context in which both are caught up in the whirlpool of freedom from family and community restraints and are yet also ensnared in webs of obligation and ascribed behaviour - she as the woman/mother and he as the 'macho' man.

The portrayal of the woman's character is much more nuanced than that of the man, in that we are given the opportunity to observe the emotional and psychological forces that battle within her. She vacillates between her desire for the child, her anxiety about losing him and the relationship if she does not have the abortion, her need to confront him with the reality of his deceit and her reluctance to accept that she was susceptible to his trickery. Her journey to his home is a measure of her daring and her personal

initiative. Her response to his wife and his son, her decision to hide the real reason for her visit from them, indicates her sensitivity to the 'other' woman. He on the other hand is unwilling to face the consequences of his action, whether it is with his wife or his girlfriend. It is clear that the fact that he is in the army allows him to appear and disappear as he pleases and also allows him to appeal to the sympathy of the women in his life.

### BORA DIYA POKUNA

Satyajit Maiti's film *Bora Diya Pokuna* is a film that awaits public release at the writing of this review. The narrative builds on the lives of three women factory workers who meet each other some years after they left the factory and went their separate ways. Maiti does not attempt to recreate the backgrounds from which these women have come to the factories. He merely places all three of them together in a boarding house and juxtaposes their varying characters and friendship against their futures.

Gothami, the main protagonist, is portrayed as a woman seething with desire, and longing for an affair; her friend Mangala is having an affair with Vipula, a young man from the Navy; the third woman, Suvineetha, refuses to engage with young men in the factory environment and keeps her faith with a boyfriend in the village. Gothami's longings manifest in her envy of Mangala and her seduction of Vipula under false pretences. Following their liaison, she pursues him but to no avail. However, by then Gothami has conceived; she returns to a cousin's home to have the child. This village is not the stuff of pastoral idyll; it is poor, dry and one can easily imagine why Gothami has moved away from this environment. However, there is a level of tolerance in her family that enables her to return there in a time of need. When the child is born, she abandons it in a railway station.

Years later, we encounter the three friends gathered at the home of Mangala and Vipula, who are married by then. The occasion is a ritual of blessing for their child. Suvineetha turns up with her husband and child. Gothami too is by then married to an older man, previously married. They have no children. Their meeting leads to a range of exposures about their lives. Mangala confesses that the child is adopted.





BORA DIYA POKUNA (Sri Lanka: Maitipo, 2001)

She and Vipula are unable to have a child of their own. Vipula discovers that Gothami is testimony to his fertility. He is desperate to know more about the child he fathered with her, since it is probably the only child he will ever have, but that child is lost to him forever. Biology rears its head in the second half of the film in a somewhat disturbing way, especially for feminists who have spent the last decades arguing that 'Biology is not destiny'! The importance accorded by Vipula to his 'biological son' and the bizarre interactions between Gothami (the 'fertile' one) and Mangala (the 'infertile' one) which focus on motherhood and on a woman's capacity to reproduce the species as being a definitive feature of womanhood reduce the sophisticated and nuanced narrative of the first half of the film to that of 'yet another film' with a traditional focus on men, women, sex and procreation.

Once again, in *Bora Diya Pokuna* you see that working in the garment factories allows young women from rural backgrounds to engage in a level of socializing with young men, going to temple, going on picnics and so on. It also creates the space for a young woman like Gothami to actively express her sexual needs and desires. From the point of view of Vipula, being a part of a large military institution gives him a sense of self-confidence associated with the power pertaining to the position, as well as the structure which he can use to repudiate Gothami when she pursues him. An interesting twist to Maitipo's tale is

that while the 'formula' have the woman who transgressed especially boundaries being punished for her 'sins', in this it is the young man who is through a crisis of manhood; he pays a heavy for transgressive sexual behavior which is usually not the case men.

#### IRA MEDIYAMA

*Ira Mediyama* is a film with parallel narratives; one has a young soldier from a poor family as the focal character;

sister has also moved out of the house and gone to work in a factory. Here the relationship between the two is of siblings, not of lovers. A critical dramatic moment in the film is the encounter between the young soldier and his sister in a brothel which he visits together with some of his army friends for a brief diversion. He is enraged to discover that his sister is working there, because of the sudden closure of the factory where she had been working. When he returns, remorseful, and seeks her out, she has disappeared. He cannot find her anywhere. His search for her takes him to other factories and workplaces where hundreds of other girls like his sister are working. When he finally reaches home, she is there, and the path is clear for a tearful reconciliation between the two.

The scene in which the young men go to the brothel is an extremely sharp depiction of the sense of power and freedom that envelopes men of the military in a country such as Sri Lanka, and gives them the confidence to negotiate sex and female company on a commercial basis. The young women they meet are from poor rural backgrounds like themselves and it is militarization that has provided them with a steady stream of clients for their work.

This is the dynamic linkage between all four films I have briefly described above. My intention was not to engage in a comprehensive review of any one of the films, but rather to examine an extremely specific



and, to me, significant element of all the films in terms of the transformative terms of employment in both the FTZ factories and the military as well as the gendered nature of human relationships between these two sectors of the youth population.

All the films point to the sense of 'freedom' that young men and women gain when they leave their homes. Employment legitimises their moving away, and provides the finances with which they may live independently and also become contributing members of the larger household back in the village. Being away from home, experiencing feelings of alienation, loneliness and stress related to their living and working conditions, they put faith in relationships which are essentially transitory and transient in nature. The license to indulge in pre-marital sexual behaviour, to flirt, to seduce is important to both the men and women concerned; however, given the patriarchal social structures that prevail it is far more radical behaviour for young Sri Lankan women from rural backgrounds. Since the films are all set in 'modern' Sri Lanka, that is the Sri Lanka of the late 20th century, the constant tension between the new freedoms and the old sanctions are only to be expected.

#### TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Yet what is disappointing in an overview of all four films in terms of their portrayal and representation of this new generation of Sri Lankan men and women and the new Sri Lankan ethos that they are a part of constructing is my insight that, whether intentionally or not, all these young directors too often fall back on conservative and traditional modalities of understanding men, women, sex and gender relations.

In *Sulang Kirillee* and *Bora Diya Pokuna*, the young men in the army/Navy are portrayed as being self-confident and irresponsible, very much enjoying the protection afforded them by their job and status. Vipula's position only become shaky when he discovers that Gothami, on whom he turned his back so heartlessly many years ago, has borne him a child. And this too only because of his present childless state. If Vipula and Mangala had had their own child it is reasonable to imagine that he would not have

been so focused on finding out the whereabouts of the child Gothami bore him. In this context, Vithanage must be lauded for his depiction of the soldier in *Ira Mediyama* as the counter-hero, diffident, unsure and in the end completely stunned by the realization of what could be the fate of young women from villages like his in the context of globalization and militarization. He weeps. He feels remorse for his macho behaviour in beating his sister. He makes a gesture of reconciliation by buying her a gift. These actions are, in themselves, a reflection of the director's attempt to create a 'different' man.

The young women workers in the garment factories are portrayed as being independent and in search of a personhood beyond that which is ascribed by culture and tradition. Their entering into intimate relationships with young men is a part of this departure from the norm. Yet, in the end, they must adapt to tradition, conform, fit into the expected roles: Sanduni is not given a chance to do so because she is murdered. We leave the young woman in *Sulang Kirillee* on the verge of an uncertain future. Of the other women (three in *Bora Diya Pokuna* and one in *Ira Mediyama*), one conforms out of choice (Suvineetha in *Bora Diya Pokuna*), the issue of choice is not even relevant when it comes to the others. Gothami and Mangala in *Bora Diya Pokuna* are both completely caught up and defined by the 'biological reproducer' trap while the younger sister in *Ira Mediyama* must beg her brother's forgiveness for her transgressions.

Charting the future is no doubt a difficult and complex task. Film directors, as any other creative person engaged in the art of re-presentation and communication, face the challenge of articulating the many options and alternative paths along which the future may be explored. Living and working in turbulent times such as ours in which conservatism and traditionalism constantly rear up in the guise of affirmative social forces that seek to 'protect' us and our 'culture', the challenge of adequately reflecting changing social mores and social relations, including gender relations, is even more complex and controversial. One can only hope that these and other young film directors will go on to take on this challenge. ■